The Academic Preparation of Teachers: Conant's Proposals

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James Conant's *The Education of American Teachers* (McGraw-Hill, New York, 1963. 210 pp. $5) should stir more controversy, prolonged study, debate, and action by college and university faculties, by state governmental agencies, and possibly by local boards of education than any educational treatise published in the last 60 years. It is a refreshing departure from the hit-and-run criticisms of teacher education made by headline seekers and axe-grinders. It is a comprehensive blueprint for redesigning teacher preparation.

Well along in his career Conant discovered the world of the public school, and he has been preoccupied with its problems ever since. In *The American High School Today*, he urged that small high schools with inadequate staffs be consolidated into larger ones. Moreover, he stumped the country on behalf of his ideas and thus speeded along a process already underway.

This time Conant wrapped his usual seal of confidentiality about his manuscript and, as he smilingly put it, retreated to his current post in Berlin to await what he expects to be strong reaction to his book. Unquestionably the book will be enthusiastically applauded and severely criticized. State departments of public instruction, affiliates of the National Education Association, and professors of education will feel most keenly the impact of Conant's recommendations for the revolution of teacher preparation in America. But old-line academicians will gain small comfort from this book.

The Education of American Teachers is the product of a 2-year study financed by the Carnegie Corporation. Conant's purpose is to stir change and reform in the teaching profession. He directs challenges primarily to those who teach teachers, but he "leap-frogs" beyond the "two hostile camps" of pros (academicians and professors of education) to seek audience with citizens, lay board members, and legislators—those in ultimate control of public schools. His book is an amalgam of frank commentary, data, illustrations and models, reports of visits to a variety of colleges and universities located chiefly in the 16 most populous states, and judgments interlarded with the author's announced assumptions and conclusions.

Sprinkled with pithy "Conantisms," this book is characterized by specificity and freedom from pedagogical jargon. Conant presents 27 major recommendations for reforming teacher education, along with innumerable lesser suggestions. This multiplicity of recommendations is recognition of the complexity of teacher education and the need for a comprehensive, rather than a piecemeal, view of it. The author takes the risk that numerous recommendations may diffuse the reader's attention and reduce the likelihood that a few recommendations which lie at the heart of the matter will have maximum impact.

As a result of the extensive coverage and probing into every center of influence and control of teacher preparation and employment, Conant and company may incur the ire of almost every educator over some point or other. This book will stimulate both professionals and laymen to undertake searching reappraisal. Salient recommendations are:

1) Teacher certification based on a bachelor's degree from a "legitimate" college or university at which the preparation of teachers is an institution-wide concern. Future teachers would be required to prove their competence in a situation approved by the state department of education.

2) The development by each institution of its own program, without requirements from states with respect to credits in general education, areas of concentration, or professional education other than a strong requirement in supervised student teaching. The institution would certify that the candidate is adequately prepared in a particular field at a designated grade level.

3) Practice teaching as the central experience of teacher preparation. Special methods of instruction, which Conant endorses, would be offered in conjunction with supervised teaching.

4) The assignment of teachers only to fields for which they are specifically and thoroughly prepared. High school teachers would be assigned to one field; this would, in turn, call for larger schools than many communities now possess.

5) Reciprocity of state certification. Teachers certified under conditions set forth in recommendations 1 and 2 would be eligible to teach in any state.

6) Financial support be made available for measures designed to improve practice teaching and to recruit superior candidates from the upper 30 percent of high school graduates. State-supported loans, which would be cancelled after a borrower had completed four or five years of successful teaching in the state's public schools, would assist in recruiting able teachers.

7) Extension of the initial probationary period for beginning teachers and a larger increase in salary than that now given them when the teacher attains permanent tenure.

8) Local school boards provide leaves and stipends for advanced study and noncredit short-term seminars, at a college or university, for teachers in service.

9) Trustees of colleges and universities should insist on faculties justifying their current practices and requirements.

10) That schools employ a new and important type of academic professional, the "clinical professor," to supervise and assess student teaching and to provide needed liaison with schools and other agencies.

11) Depth not be required in a single field or cluster of fields for teachers in kindergarten through grade 3. Teachers for grades 4 and up should be given content emphasis and teaching methods for a specific field or area of study.

12) Prepare teachers of physical

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education, art, and music to teach at all levels.

13) Comprehensive examinations in all programs which grant the master's degree, with elementary courses in subject areas accepted if they are needed to improve a teacher's competence. Extension courses at the graduate level are out, as are campus courses taken while engaged in full-time teaching.

14) Accrediting functions be removed from such voluntary bodies as regional associations and the National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education. Such organizations would assume an advisory relationship to higher institutions and to local school boards. NCATE's governing board would be broadened to include more representatives of scholarly disciplines.

Conant plugs for greater flexibility in certifying teachers, and he would allow colleges to mold their own programs (except for practice teaching), trusting the collegial conscience, *caveat emptor*, and a free, competitive market to drive out weak programs and encourage strong ones. Were this to be done without safeguards, serious abuses could arise and false economies might be attempted by institutions unable or unwilling to follow the entire prescription. Theoretically, a comprehensive plan such as Conant's could be adopted *in toto*. But the great diversity in quality among colleges, universities, and school systems makes hazardous the abandonment of accreditation and the deeding of full employment power to local school boards. The public interest needs more safeguards than Conant offers, if such advances as the "approved program" are to be shelved.

Teacher education, the certification process, and program accreditation *are* in need of reform. Conant's evidence and his arguments are strong in the first instance, but he is less convincing in discussing the latter two. He is at his creative best in urging greater latitude for institutional experimentation and improvement in the education of teachers. He is on strong ground when he seeks a revolution in professional education through the centrality of supervised student teaching and when he calls for collaborative efforts of schools, colleges, and state departments of education.

The need of teachers for greater breadth and depth in their academic achievement is endemic. To improve this situation Conant would redesign high school curricula to emphasize the basic educational underpinnings of teachers, strengthen general education, require a field of concentration for all teachers who work beyond the third grade, restrict the use of valuable time devoted to electives, and provide "laboratory experience" to enhance the effectiveness of education courses. He would revamp survey courses, reduce slavish addiction to textbooks, encourage independent study and the use of team teaching, and eliminate such eclectic courses as "Social Foundations of Education." Despite the following assertion, "There is no conclusive evidence that any specific course improves teaching ability," he proposes required courses in the teaching of reading and in child growth and development for elementary teachers.

He indicts institutions for using graduate students to teach freshman courses, for their pretentious but unrealistic reading lists, and for their failure to utilize the best available examinations to advance students to more challenging content. In the small college, Conant would require no professor of education, but he would employ a well-educated professional, the "clinical professor," to coordinate all efforts to prepare student teachers for a specific field and to evaluate them in that field. In elementary education, the cost of the change would be too great for many small colleges, in which case Conant advises them to get out of the business of preparing teachers at that level.

Conant finds little agreement and no universally accepted model with respect to general and professional education or subject specialties. The conclusion is reached that, although 5th-year programs may be most useful for limited numbers, they cannot, will not, and should not become the principal avenue to a teaching career. He considers state certification policy, expressed in terms of specified credits and courses, too nominal to serve the purpose of quality teaching and suggests that it should be abolished. He notes great variations in existing regulations and asserts that states do not enforce their existing laws. He would not use standardized tests for certification purposes.

A case is made for restricting high school teachers to a single field. Coupled with that of eliminating small, inadequate high schools, Conant's idea is right in principle. But, until such adjustment has been carried out, the implementation of this recommendation would make the administration of most schools difficult; in certain schools it would be impossible as a practical measure. Achievement of this recommendation will be a 10- to 15-year project at best.

A power struggle is currently raging over accreditation of instructional programs for future teachers. Into the middle of this conflict, Conant has dropped a bombshell. He would strip existing voluntary agencies of their accreditation function and make them advisory bodies to schools and colleges. He mentions only regional associations and the National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education, but I presume the same reasoning would apply to all accrediting bodies.

The assumption that state regulations and accreditation standards are unnecessary restraints upon the freedom of colleges and local school boards needs examination. In some ways these laws are unnecessarily arbitrary and restrictive. But Conant places greater trust in the quality of school boards than the facts warrant. Indeed, if one seeks the greatest single problem facing American schools, it is not certification laws, accrediting agents, colleges, or low pay scales—it is the spotty quality of school boards. They range from intelligent, well-educated, hard-working public servants to the ignorant and the self-aggrandizing. It is impossible for 32,891 independent school boards to carry out the Conant proposal. Some authority is required to hold the worst of them somewhat in line and avert chaos in employment practices and standards of instruction.

Conant is correct in asserting that the accreditation process administered by the states is inadequate. But state accreditation is not the only problem. In general, an institution that has planned carefully the other four-fifths of the student's program finds the state requirements so minimal that they are seldom binding.

What is also to the point is the lack of adequate qualitative measures of teaching effectiveness. Paper programs, blind counts of books, dollar marks, teacher-student ratios, class size, numbers of doctorates on the faculty, and the like, *ad infinitum*, will not reach the essence of quality. This derives from the nature and worth of the learning-teaching situation, class by class, professor by professor, department by department, area by area.

Until the certifying authority can know and evaluate the content of a

course as it is experienced by students, we will never get to the root of the matter. This is where institutional self-study, seriously and courageously conducted by determined faculty members, deans, department chairmen, and presidents, can improve quality through faculty development and weeding out the weak and the unfit from college faculties. The "battle" is not only between two breeds of professionals; it is between types of institutions. The early American college's and university's arrogant neglect of and lack of concern with the problems of the population at large led to the rise of public institutions, land-grant colleges, and normal schools. It was the latter that met the classic need of a democratic society: teachers for the young. But today a new and wholesome orientation of universities and their faculties toward concern for the preparation of teachers is evident. Universities should serve the schools, not dominate them. The heavy-handedness with which they have tried, in the past, to determine the curricula of lower schools, as if all pupils were college-bound, is no recommendation in the present situation.

To link inadequate school systems and inept boards with weak colleges that are preparing teachers would be pathetic. Nor can the education of teachers be entrusted to *all* colleges and universities. Neither bigness nor general prestige justifies endorsing whatever an institution might do. As Conant wisely points out, there must be institutional commitment and deep concern for the public schools, not just by the professors of education but by entire faculties —faculties which today are sometimes neither committed nor interested, because their chief rewards lie in the direction of research and writing, not in the guidance of neophytes in the teaching profession. How to awaken this interest and obtain genuine commitment is a difficult question.

Further, some of the affiliates of the National Education Association which are named by Conant—imperfect as they may be—are forces for building a dynamic society, and they are this nation's only real bulwark against the capture of the teaching profession by trade unions. These organizations are responsible entities. The task is to improve them and to help them become more representative and more responsive with respect to teacher education institutions. The consequences of abandoning accreditation deserve the same scrutiny that Conant has given to institutional programs and curricula.

State departments of education should answer Conant's charge that their staffs are not as competent as college faculties to judge what is needed in the preparation of teachers. Conant criticizes the academic backgrounds of state department of education personnel.

Although he is critical of both the state departments and the professors of education (the latter "spend too much time mouthing platitudes"), Conant finds no support for the charge that the education professors have entered into a conspiracy with the staffs of education departments. He properly warns against professors of education teaching in fields for which they lack proper background. His point is timely and well taken.

The notion about vast requirements for teachers in professional education just is not so, as Conant states. As for teachers colleges, Conant defends them from unwarranted attacks. Although these colleges number fewer than 100 in the nation, they educate 20 percent of the teachers. Of them Conant writes that ". . . the program in the teachers college is *not*, in comparison with that of the college of arts and sciences, deficient, thin, or lacking in what goes to make up a 'good, solid major.'" The better teachers colleges, he finds, have more distinguished scholars than either the poorer universities or many private colleges. "Therefore," he concludes, "it is not possible to say that a teacher may be better prepared in any particular type of institution."

Conant makes this significant observation: ". . . quarrels about teacher education serve to mask more fundamental conflicts over economic, political, racial, or ideological issues. Furthermore, there are professors of the arts and sciences who warmly support education courses, and there are professors of education and public school people among the leaders in the movement to strengthen the teacher's academic preparation." In this there is bright hope for genuine advancement of teacher education in America.

How shall desirable changes be brought about? It is enough for one able, fearless educator to raise issues and propose solutions. But beyond that stage of ideation and communication must come a strategy for reform. This important matter James Conant leaves to others.

Life Nature Series

The Mammals. Richard Carrington and the editors of *Life*. Time, Inc., New York, 1963. 192 pp. Illus. $3.95.

With the exception of a handful of domesticated species, a few others that are of economic importance, and some that are commonly kept in zoos, are the several thousand other species of living mammals of concern to any but specialists? Evidently the answer is yes. San Diego has discovered that its migrating gray whales are a tourist attraction, hundreds of persons gather each evening at Carlsbad Caverns to see the spectacular flight of bats, zoological parks and museums are visited by ever increasing throngs, and suddenly there is a market for books on mammals.

In response, several volumes designed for the university classroom and others for the home library have appeared in quick succession. *Life*'s *Mammals* is an exceptional entry in the field. Its price is attractive; it is very well, if not spectacularly, illustrated (see the cover on this issue of *Science*), and its split-level text is unique.

The world of mammals is described in eight chapters that average about 20 pages each. Classification, evolution, adaptation, locomotion, food, survival, movements, and reproduction are the main headings, and they are concealed in such attractive titles as "The quick and the dead," "The wanderers and the stay-at-homes," and "Love life." A well-chosen, in-print bibliography (oldest title, 1929) concludes the volume.

The text achieves an exceptionally high degree of factual accuracy, and it is written in consistently simple and usually clear language. Seven or eight pages of text introduce each chapter. The same facts are further distilled to two or three short paragraphs that accompany each two-page spread of pictures in the final two-thirds of each chapter. The picture captions themselves provide the ultimate level of condensation.

Life's *Mammals* is certain to provide a great many persons with a good basic knowledge of mammals, whether the readers simply scan the pictures or get the triple impact by reading the entire volume.

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